Ryan Preston-Roedder
Occidental College
Fall 2016

**Research Summary**

1

My research, which comprises work in moral and political philosophy, moral psychology, and philosophy of religion, begins with the following familiar picture of one important role that morality plays in human life: conforming to moral ideals enables you to live in a valuable form of community with other, equally reasonable people, even though these people's interests and goals may be considerably different from yours. In other words, there are a staggering number of people on the planet, and their various interests come into sharp and frequent conflict. On the one hand, it is appropriate for each person to devote some special attention to her own private interests, and to the interests of people who are close to her; but on the other hand, there is a sense in which each of us is just one person among others, and no one is any more or less significant than anyone else. Both of these judgments are central to the living of our lives, and conforming to moral ideals is appealing and important, in part, because it enables us to live in a way that gives expression to each of them: a morally virtuous person sometimes pursues her private interests, but does so in a way that, to some degree, draws her out of her solitude, and into valuable forms of community with others.

Discussions, and expressions, of this view in the literature tend to focus on respects in which, in order to enter into relevant forms of community, we must limit our outward behavior in ways that leave room for other people to pursue their various reasonable goals. By contrast, my work focuses on respects in which, to enter into these forms of community, we have to trust people, have faith in them, and adopt other, related attitudes toward them. In other words, my work focuses on re-

spects in which our entering into these forms of community depends not only on our outward behavior, but also on features of our inner, psychological lives; and this emphasis on the inner life helps us better understand the role that morality occupies in our lives, and better appreciate the appeal and importance of conforming to moral ideals.

My current research is organized into two distinct, but related, strands, each of which appeals in some way to claims about the respects in which our adopting certain attitudes toward one another draws us into valuable forms of community. The first strand appeals to such claims in order to provide novel answers to some widely discussed questions about the nature and value of rights, and the second appeals to such claims in order to address topics that have been largely neglected in recent moral philosophy – topics concerning the moral significance of faith and grief. I will now describe each strand in more detail, and then briefly describe an additional project and my plans for future research.

2

It is a commonplace that there are limits to the ways we can permissibly treat people, even in the service of good ends: we may not steal someone's wallet, even if we plan to donate the contents to famine relief; break a promise to help a colleague move, even if we encounter someone else along the way whose need is somewhat more urgent; or harvest organs from one person without consent, in order to save others who need transplants. In other words, people have *moral rights* not to be treated in certain ways. The view that people have such rights is central not only to discussions within moral and political philosophy, but also to many people's conception of the distinctive value of human life. The first strand of my research concerns the nature and value of these rights.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the view that we have rights, many philosophers have found rights deeply puzzling: Our rea-

son to observe people's right not to be mistreated in some way does not seem to derive, in any obvious way, from the importance, for potential victims, of avoiding that form of mistreatment. After all, if we observe, say, people's right not to be tortured, then we will not torture someone, even when this is the only way to prevent even *more* people from being tortured. It seems that, on balance, we could better serve potential victims' interests by doing whatever would minimize the number of people who are tortured. Nor does our reason to observe people's rights seem to derive from reasons to protect our own interests, or the interests of people we care about. To the contrary, people's rights prohibit us from mistreating them whether or not our observing the prohibition would serve our own interests, and no matter what we care about. But if our reason to observe people's rights does not derive from the importance of protecting potential victims' interests, our own interests, or the interests of people we care about, then it is unclear what its source could be. How could there be prohibitions against mistreating people that both prohibit us from doing what would best serve others' interests *and* bind us without regard to our particular aims?

There are many accounts in the literature that attempt to make rights intelligible. But none of these accounts commands anything like universal assent, and even the most promising among them are, at best, substantially incomplete. In "**Civic Trust**", I develop a novel account of rights that fills important gaps left by views in the literature. This account helps make rights intelligible by identifying a morally significant relation that we bear to people when, and only when, we observe their rights not to be mistreated in certain ways: put roughly, observing people's rights is a condition for being worthy of a certain form of trust, and being worthy of such trust is an essential part of living with others in the sort of harmony that characterizes morally permissible interaction. By focusing, in ways that other accounts do not, on the role that observing one another's rights plays in our psychological lives, this approach not

only makes the structure of rights more intelligible, but also helps us better appreciate the force of our reason to observe one another's rights, and better understand the kind of moral community to which we should aspire.

In "**A Better World**", I clarify and defend the form of argument that underlies a very different approach to making rights intelligible, an approach that is distinct from, but compatible with, the approach that I adopt in "Civic Trust". Thomas Nagel, Frances Kamm, and Warren Quinn each argue that if we have rights, say, to freedom of religious expression and protection against police torture, then we have a certain desirable moral status; but if we do not have rights, then we have some other, less valuable status instead. So, they conclude, we would all be better off if we had rights, and this somehow gives us reason to believe that we do, in fact, have them. This account of rights is an instance of the following form of argument: if the truth of some moral theory – quite apart from the results of our *believing* the theory or acting in accord with it – would make for a better world, this fact somehow provides evidence of the theory's truth. This may seem to be an obvious non-starter; after all, the mere fact that the truth of some empirical claim – for example, the claim that there is an afterlife – would be desirable does not, by itself, give us any reason to believe that it is true. But I argue that this form of argument, when it is properly understood, is valid in moral philosophy, and that recognizing its validity helpfully broadens our understanding of how to justify moral principles. I also identify some of the argument's most promising applications.

3

Like the first strand of my research, the second strand rests on claims about ways in which attitudes that we adopt toward one another draw us into valuable forms of community. But this second strand, which is marked by its engagement with psychological research and literary work, addresses largely neglected topics concerning the significance of faith and the significance

of grief. Turning first to faith, non-religious moral philosophy has devoted little attention to the nature and value of faith. This may seem unsurprising. Because the significance of faith is typically associated with theism, it may seem that a careful study of faith has little to offer non-religious moral philosophy. Furthermore, in the absence of religious beliefs that might lead someone to value certain kinds of faith, philosophers might be, not just indifferent to faith, but hostile to it. Philosophers prize rationality, and so, may dismiss faith as a form of naïvete, or as some other objectionable form of *ir*rationality.

But it would be a serious mistake for moral philosophers of any sort to dismiss faith altogether. I argue in this strand of my research that, whether or not theism holds, certain forms of faith in people – as distinguished from faith in God or faith in a set of religious tenets – are centrally important virtues; that is, they are character traits that are morally admirable, or admirable from some broader perspective of human flourishing. For example, imagine a civil rights activist who works to secure just treatment for an oppressed racial minority. The activist's faith in the very political leaders and citizens who accept, or even support, oppressive institutions may prompt her to pursue a campaign of non-violent resistance, which seeks not only to eliminate injustice, but also to convert one's oppressors and enter into community with them. Or consider a loving parent whose headstrong son has been credibly accused of some terrible crime, though the evidence against him is not clearly decisive. This parent's faith may prompt her to cling, for a while, to her belief that her son is innocent, even if informed, disinterested observers are likely to conclude that he is guilty. Or imagine a first-generation college student – a child of Mexican immigrants – who discovers, upon entering college, that many of her classmates and teachers have rather dim views of Hispanic students' drive and intellectual ability. Such a student's faith in her own competence and in the quality of her own character may counteract her doubts about her ability to succeed in these challenging circumstances. I argue that a careful

study of the nature of these forms of faith, and the roles that they play in human life, promises to deepen our understanding of aspects of moral life, and aspects of human flourishing, that are poorly grasped.

I discuss these issues in three interrelated papers: In "**Faith in Humanity**", I argue that having a certain limited form of faith in other people's moral decency, namely, the sort of faith that the political activist in the example above has in her fellow citizens, is an important moral virtue. I defend this view in two ways. First, in order to make the view intuitively more plausible, I discuss two moral exemplars – one historical and the other literary – whose lives vividly exhibit such faith. Then I present an underlying rationale for the view: put roughly, having this sort of faith in people's decency tends to prompt them to act rightly, helps us avoid treating them unjustly, and – crucially – draws us into a morally important form of solidarity with them. In "**Three Varieties of Faith**", I continue to develop my characterization of faith in humanity, and I argue that, in addition to having faith in humanity, a virtuous person has two other forms of faith in people, namely, a kind of faith in people to whom she bears certain personal relationships – for example, her spouse or her child – and a kind of faith in herself. Finally, in **"Love and Social Justice"**, I draw on James Baldwin's work in order to consider some of the vulnerabilities and ambiguities that are associated with loving your fellow citizens, and having faith in their capacity for moral reform, when you live in an oppressive society.

I said above that thinking carefully about the nature and value of these forms of faith illuminates aspects of moral life and aspects of human flourishing that have been overlooked or poorly understood in recent moral philosophy. But I also wish to highlight two other respects in which this project matters. First, having the forms of faith that I describe may sometimes prompt us to form beliefs that are, to some degree, epistemically irrational; in other words, a person's faith may sometimes prompt her to violate norms that govern theoretical reasoning.

So, I argue, accounting for the moral significance of these forms of faith, or accounting for their significance from a broader perspective of human flourishing, helps us identify important limits on the role that epistemic rationality should play in our ideals of how to live. Second, examining these various forms of faith enables us to recognize certain limited, but important, respects in which, ideally, relations among members of the moral community mirror relations between friends, family members, or members of certain other kinds of personal relationships that we expect to find in a good human life. This recognition deepens our understanding of the nature and appeal of the sort of moral community to which we should aspire.

Turning now from faith to grief, imagine that someone recovers relatively quickly, say, within two or three months, from grief over the death of her spouse, whom she loved and who loved her; and suppose that, after some brief interval, she remarries. Does the fact that she feels better and gets on with her life relatively quickly somehow diminish the quality of her earlier relationship? Does it constitute a failure to do well by the person who died? In "**Grief and Recovery**", which is co-authored with Erica Preston-Roedder, we respond to two arguments that give affirmative answers to these questions. The first, which is due to Dan Moller, states that recovering quickly from grief over the death of someone close to you is regrettable, in one respect, because it means that this person was relatively *un*important to you. The second argument, which derives from some classic literary discussions of grief, states that recovering from sadness, and getting on with your life, shortly after a loved one's death is regrettable because it constitutes a grave failure of solidarity, a way of abandoning the person who died. Responding to these arguments promises to mitigate certain anxieties about whether we do well by the people we love after they die. But beyond this, it helps us better understand what it means to be important to these people, and better understand how the attitudes that we adopt toward these people reinforce, or undermine, our solidarity with them. In other words, the

project promises to help us better understand how to cultivate good relationships with our loved ones during their lives.

4

I will close by describing an additional project, as well as my plans for future research. In "**Self-Deception and Kant's Moral Philosophy**", I describe some distinctive challenges that the phenomenon of self-deception poses for Kant's moral theory, and I argue that Kant's theory has the resources to address these challenges. This paper is part of a larger project, which I pursue in the second strand of my research, of exploring the relation between norms that govern our theoretical reasoning – or in other words, our reasoning about what is true – and norms that govern our practical reasoning, or in other words, our reasoning about how to act.

In future research, which will develop and extend the second strand of my research, I plan to address further topics concerning the nature and value of faith and related attitudes. In "**Living with Absurdity: A Nobleman's Guide**", I will draw on Tolstoy's fiction, as well as his memoir of his spiritual crisis, in order to characterize a form of faith in one's basic values; and I will argue that exhibiting this sort of faith is part of an appealing response to the philosophical problem of life's absurdity. In **"The Religious Outlook"**, I will pursue interests that I acquired as a result of developing a course on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Philosophers like John Dewey, and more recently, Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin, have tried to identify a religious attitude that we can adopt, and which contributes to our flourishing, whether or not we believe that anything like God exists. I want to explore some respects in which Dostoevsky's fiction helps us identify such an attitude and appreciate its significance.